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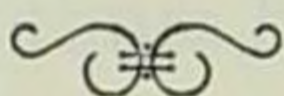
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On Freedom's Sunlit Scroll

Baptists everywhere — in Europe, England, on the world-wide mission field, and in America — look to the New Testament as the charter of their religious liberty. The distinctive principles of Baptist faith are to be discovered in the glowing pages of the living Bible, while its daring exponents have defied popes and reformers alike. Baptists have battled against monarchs and magistrates, died martyrs' deaths for freedom on the Continent, in Stuart England, in Puritan New England, and in Virginia where they were oppressed by the Established Church. Hard sledding has been their meat and drink; to live and die for religious liberty has been their mainstay and their glory.

Historians are not all in agreement as to the actual beginnings of Baptist faith. Some trace the movement back to John the Baptizer, preaching judgment and repentance in the wilderness of the Jordan River, about A. D. 28. Some, indeed, regard Jesus of Nazareth as a Baptist, while others credit Paul of Tarsus with a like belief. The early

Church commonly baptized her converts by immersion, but sprinkling or pouring came to be followed as alternate modes. Infant baptism became the general custom in the Latin West, especially after the time of Pope Gregory I, while immersion remained the accepted mode in Eastern Orthodox territories.

The Protestant Revolution of sixteenth-century Europe introduced, among many another innovation, the principle of the right of private interpretation of the Bible. Baptists include this among others as a sacred right belonging to all Christian people. Certain minorities in Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries and England, who dissented equally from Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Anglicans, were called Anabaptists — those who re-baptized their followers. Many other left-wing minority groups, struggling against the fiercest opposition during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, are usually thought of as belonging to the great Baptist family — Mennonites, Brethren, Dunkers, Adventists and the like; but those bodies will not be dwelt upon here.

In Stuart England Baptists fought with Oliver Cromwell in his New-Model Army against the prerogatives of Charles I; later on, they helped in securing a limited toleration from William and Mary. It was from England that Baptists, though at first in very small numbers, came over to the American colonies. Instinctively recalled will be

the names of men like John Smyth, who led the Gainsborough group as exiles to Amsterdam, Holland; Roger Williams, who came to Boston, was exiled by the General Court of Massachusetts, and went out to found Providence Plantation; and Dr. John Clarke, who aided Rhode Island in obtaining a charter from Charles II in 1663.

Both Williams and Clarke were "men of unusual distinction." It was they who planted the first Baptist churches in America, about 1638 or 1639, at Providence and Newport, Rhode Island. Not only every Baptist but all Americans should respect the hard-fought religious freedom for which these early Baptists lived to the uttermost.

In colonial times Baptists were frequently looked upon as dangerous radicals and enemies of order both in church life and in political matters. Harvard College in 1654 dismissed its capable president, Henry Dunster, when he became a Baptist, and many others were fined, whipped, and imprisoned in Boston. Not until 1665 was there a Baptist church in Boston, but Baptist growth was only spurred on the more by such severe measures as were taken against them. They were more hospitably received in Pennsylvania where considerable freedom in religion was enjoyed, thanks to William Penn's "Frame of Government." The first Baptist association in America was formed at Philadelphia in 1707.

As the Revolutionary War approached, Vir-

ginia also became a battle-ground for religious liberty. Even King William's Toleration Act of 1689 "made little difference in the religious situation in that colony." Due to rising immigration as well as to colonial revivalism, the Virginia Baptists struggled to preach without first being licensed by the Colonial Court. They soon joined forces with the Virginia Presbyterians who were likewise held down by the Established Church. At the decisive moment, Thomas Jefferson struck for the rights of dissenters in the Virginia assembly, while another great patriot, James Madison, finally succeeded in 1785 in getting his "Statute of Religious Freedom" passed, a triumph aided by the persistent pressure of Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers alike. Patrick Henry also worked for the abolition of the exclusive rights of the Virginia Establishment.

Happily, New England Baptists and Virginia Baptists fought shoulder to shoulder in seeing to it that the Constitution of the United States of America should contain no religious test clause. To that end, they petitioned President George Washington and secured his promise to use his high office for the achievement of this national boon. The American "Bill of Rights" of 1791 is the people's safeguard of their religious liberty, and Baptists must be eternally thanked for having nobly played their role in securing it. Exultantly we sing:

Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light.

Basic Baptist principles are: the sole reliance upon the Bible as the Word of God; loyalty to the Great Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ; adult believers' baptism and their regeneration by the Holy Spirit; separation of church and state, and the autonomy of the local church — in a word, *democracy*.

Some Baptist churches admit new members by a church letter, even from another denomination, while many have not, even from colonial days, insisted upon re-baptism; but, speaking generally, Baptist practice is that of immersion. In contrast to the older confessional churches, they do not baptize infants — whence the term, "antipedobaptist." Infants may, however, be dedicated to God, and many Baptists observe this beautiful rite. The New Testament ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are followed by Baptists universally.

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